United Nations A/CONF.192/PC/25

General Assembly

Distr.: General
10 January 2001

Original: English

Preparatory Committee for the United Nations Conference on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects
Second session
8-19 January 2001

Working paper by Switzerland and France on establishing a tracing mechanism to prevent and reduce excessive and destabilizing accumulation and transfer of small arms and light weapons

The present working paper follows up the food-for-thought paper that France and Switzerland circulated at the first session of the Preparatory Committee for the United Nations Conference on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects (document A/CONF.192/PC/7). It takes up and further develops ideas and suggestions that were presented in that document.

Introduction

Excessive and destabilizing accumulation and transfer of small arms and light weapons[1], as well as their unchecked spread within societies, pose a serious threat to regional and international peace and security. These weapons of concern contribute to terrible human suffering, reduce prospects for sustainable development and foster a culture of violence.

[1] For the purposes of the present working paper, small arms and light weapons are defined as weapons made or modified to military specifications for use as lethal instruments of war.

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In order to understand and to come to grips with this complex problem, a number of aspects – including arms control and disarmament, development as well as humanitarian issues – need to be addressed. Since no panacea can be found for this problem, a comprehensive plan of action is called for. Measures to acquire a better knowledge of the location and circulation of weapons of concern are a key element of such a plan.

The French-Swiss initiative focuses on one specific aspect of the problem of excessive and destabilizing accumulation and transfer of small arms and light weapons– the difficulty of tracing small arms flows of concern - and suggests possible ways and means to overcome it.

The problem

Unchecked flows of small arms and light weapons contribute to the problem of excessive and destabilizing accumulation and spread of these weapons, particularly in regions of conflict and tension. So do insecurely managed holdings or significant surpluses of small arms and light weapons, which are particularly vulnerable to loss through theft, corruption or neglect. The lack of adequate institutionalized mechanisms for finding out how such weapons of concern have been lost or have reached these regions undermines and weakens efforts to tackle this problem. Unable to stop weapons falling into the wrong hands, states have great difficulty in breaking the spiral of supply and demand of small arms and of associated violence.

Aim of the French-Swiss initiative

The French-Swiss initiative aims to strengthen the ability of states to take effective action to prevent or reduce small arms and light weapons flows that contribute to excessive and destabilizing accumulation and spread of these weapons, particularly in regions of conflict and tension. This would be done by **establishing a cooperation mechanism and taking preventive measures** including marking and record keeping, so as to enable states to identify and trace lines of supply of these weapons of concern.

Key Elements of the French-Swiss initiative

A possible international agreement to enable states to identify and trace lines of supply of small arms and light weapons of concern should include the following key elements:

1) At the international level, states shall establish a tracing mechanism whereby they **commit themselves to cooperate in tracing lines of supply of small arms** that contribute to the excessive and destabilizing accumulation and spread of these weapons, particularly in regions of conflict or tension. To that effect, states shall commit themselves:

- To respond promptly and accurately to requests for information from other states to assist them in their efforts to trace lines of supply of small arms and light weapons of concern;
- To ensure an appropriate level of confidentiality relating to the information provided to them by other states in the context of specific tracing efforts;
- To respond promptly and accurately, and according to similar guidelines on confidentiality as mentioned above, to requests from the UN Secretary-General for information to assist the UN in efforts to trace lines of supply of small arms and light weapons that have been discovered in countries subject to a UN arms embargo;
- To similarly cooperate with the UN in efforts aimed at tracing, and thereby preventing and reducing, small arms and light weapons flows that contribute to the excessive and destabilizing accumulation and spread of these weapons in regions in which the UN is operating a peace mission;

2) At the national level, states shall commit themselves to **take preventive measures** to enhance their collective ability to identify and trace flows of small arms and light weapons of concern. In particular, states shall establish a national legislative and/or regulatory framework:

- To ensure that all small arms and light weapons are appropriately and uniquely marked at the stage of manufacture, and that existing unmarked or inadequately marked small arms and light weapons are either expeditiously destroyed or appropriately marked;

- To ensure that accurate record-keeping systems are established and organized and maintained in such a way as to ensure that accurate information can be promptly retrieved and collated by competent national authorities;
- To ensure that marking and registration systems are such as to allow clear identification of the countries of manufacture and of authorized import, to facilitate efforts to trace lines of supply of weapons of concern.

3) In order to support the **implementation and further development** of these cooperation and prevention measures, states shall commit themselves:

- To set up an international consultative body to advise them on technical matters related to tracing, marking and record keeping.
- To promote consultations with industry, research institutes and experts both at national and international levels in order to benefit from their expertise.

4) To ensure the broadest possible participation in and facilitate implementation of the above-mentioned measures, states shall promote **international cooperation and assistance** in training and raising technical and enforcement capacities.